Best Destination Guides

Explore Before You Go

Want to take a trip to China? Need to sail up the Nile? Spend some time with these online destination guides and you'll be an informed traveler. These well-regarded sites will help you choose the perfect vacation spot or plan a business getaway, tell you everything you need to know about your destination, and help you make the reservations. These sites will do everything you need to prepare for your trip except pack your bags and get you to the airport on time.

Not all destination guides are equal: It's smart to visit more than one and it pays to know what's available at each. Read on to dig into seven of the Web's best travel sites.

Fodor's Travel Online

Fodor's is one of the biggest names in travel guidebooks. The Fodor's Web site, at www.fodors.com, is a fantastic starting place for people who are planning a vacation, whether the destination is domestic or exotic. If you're not sure where your next trip will take you, the site is a great place to get ideas.

Starting with the map on the home page, find your destination country or city. When you select the destination, you'll find yourself at the Overview page, which provides a descriptive picture of the place, the inhabitants, climate, and culture. If you're shopping for a vacation destination, the Overview page provides a poetic description that can help you decide whether a place is right for you.

The Overview is just the tip of the iceberg (or sand dune, or skyscraper, depending on the destination). Use the links in the left sidebar to dive into more specific info about that place. These links vary depending on the locale, but you'll usually find information about hotels, restaurants, sights and activities, side trips, and suggested walking tours.

Check the When To Go page to find out the most popular times to take that journey—and why. No matter when you're going, the Smart Travel Tips page shows how to get there: by air, train, car, bus, or taxi. The Best In 5-7 Days Itinerary gives a suggested to-do list for a weeklong trip.

If you're shopping for a deal on a trip but don't have a destination in mind yet, go to the site's Travel Wire page: It's a blog with information about discounts, destination ideas, news about new vacation packages, and pointers to Overlooked And Underrated cities. We found bargain packages to Ireland that included a stay in a 400-year-old castle and information about the variety of cities that offer guided Segway tours.

The site covers major travel destinations around the world, but certainly not every place you might want to go. You'll find information about a dozen cities for some U.S. states, but others have just one or two. When we checked, information about Washington state was limited to Seattle, and apparently the only thing to see in Montana is Glacier National Park. The same is true for international destinations, where only major cities are thoroughly covered—those are the cities that most tourists and vacationers would want to see. If your destination is off the beaten track, however, you're not likely to find much information here.

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Overview
When it was founded by Spanish conquistador Pedro de Valdivia in 1541, Santiago was little more than the triangular patch of land embraced by two arms of the Río Mapocho. Today that area, known as Santiago Centro, is just one of 32 comunas that make up the city, each with its own distinct personality. You'd never mistake Patronato, a neighborhood north of downtown filled with Moorish-style mansions built by families who made their fortunes in textiles, with Providencia, where the modern skyscrapers built by international corporations crowd the avenues. The chic shopping centers of Las Condes have little in common with the outdoor markets in Bellavista.
Perhaps the neighborhoods have retained their individuality because many have histories as old as Santiago itself. Nuñoa, for example, was a hardworking farm town to the east. Farther away was El Arrayán, a sleepy village in the foothills of the Andes. As the capital grew, these and many other communities were drawn inside the city limits. If you ask Santiaguinos you meet today where they reside, they are just as likely to mention their neighborhood as their city.
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Make FUN a family affair.
Your Westin Family Fun package includes:
• Complimentary Admission to the Westin Kids Club® at Westin resorts
• Free movies at Westin hotels
discover family fun
exclusively at westin.com
FODORS.COM
Fodor's Overview pages capture the flavor of far-away cities in words and pictures.

There are a few more resources at Fodor's that are easy to miss but worth using. The National Parks guide (www.fodors.com/parks) serves up information about all of the U.S. and Canadian national parks. The Living Language section (www.fodors.com/language) delivers a wide variety of useful expressions in French, German, Italian, and Spanish. And the Focus On Photography section (www.fodors.com/focus) zooms in on expert tips for making perfect travel pictures.

Fodor's is best known for its printed guides to destination

cities. Click the Shop tab to peruse and purchase those books. You can't book a trip through the site; it will send you to Expedia.com for that.

Frommer's

In 1957, "Europe On $5 A Day" was Frommer's first book; today the company publishes more than 300 travel guidebooks. You can't enjoy a trip to Europe on $5 these days, but if your budget is somewhat more flexible, Frommer's Web site (www.frommers.com) can help you plan a fantastic trip to Europe or just about anyplace else.

When you're shopping for a holiday, start with the Trip Ideas tab. Use its list of types of vacations (family, honeymoon, student, and so on) to find ideas that meet your needs and desires. You'll also find resources for disabled travelers, gays and lesbians, and senior citizens. If you're flexible about your travel destination, click the Deals And News tab. The daily articles there show deals on airfare and travel packages, both domestic and abroad.

When you've decided on a vacation spot, click the Destinations tab to find out about that place. The site's city guides aren't limited to the big cities. You can find brief information about even small and medium-sized cities, including hotels and restaurants, attractions, and side trips. There's typically much more information about bigger cities, including histories, descriptions of neighborhoods, and suggested walking tours, but it's nice to be able to find some information about small towns. In addition to cities, the Destinations section lets you see the highlights of wider regions, such as "outside L.A." and "the I-40 corridor."

Lying on the beach for days on end appeals to some, but if you crave adventure when you're on vacation, look to the Calendar Of Events At Frommer's (www.frommers.com/tips/calendar_of_events), which lists special events taking place around the globe. Be warned: This page can lead to difficult choices. We couldn't decide between jetting off to the Bahamas for the Eleuthera Pineapple Festival or to Liverpool for International Beatles Week.

The site also offers printable trip planners in PDF format. The Travel Planner (www.frommers.com/tips/packing_tips/travel_planner.pdf) is a pre-trip checklist that can help you rest assured that

Hunting for the perfect vacation spot? Frommer's Trip Ideas and Deals section will point you to travel deals for any budget.

you've packed everything you'll need. The Activity Planner will help you know how to spend your playtime: on the beach, hiking, biking, and so on.

The site's bustling Travel Talk message boards are useful for getting answers from expert travelers or just for chatting about exotic places when you're stuck at home. There are forums dedicated to specific activities (such as theme parks and road trips), lifestyles (including disabled and single travel), and travel tips. If you're traveling on a budget, the Hospitality Exchange board can help you find a couch to crash on for free.

Of course, you have the option to purchase Frommer's guidebooks from the site's Bookstore. Even if you're just browsing, free PDF excerpts are available for many of the books. After you've purchased a guidebook, check the Updates section to learn what's new at your destination since the book rolled off the press.

You can't book travel directly from Frommer's. Instead, the site redirects you to a variety of partners, such as Travelocity and Hotels.com.

TripAdvisor

You don't want to trek halfway across the country (or the world) to sleep at a hole of a hotel or eat at rinky-dink restaurants. A visit to TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com) can prevent that catastrophe. The site houses more than two million reviews of hotels, attractions, and restaurants around the globe. Type a city name—no city is too small—and you'll see a list of the top-rated hotels, B&Bs, restaurants, and attractions in that town. The Itinerary section provides a laundry list of attractions in that city.

Reviews and ratings are created by travelers like you, instead of paid researchers. You'll often find a dozen or more reviews of a particular hotel, attraction, or restaurant, allowing you to get a sense of that place's overall atmosphere and quality. In addition to written reviews, you can get a taste of many cities with User Photos, which provide an unvarnished look at hotels and attractions that others have visited.

Maybe you don't yet know where you'll be headed for your next vacation. TripAdvisor can help with that, too. You can get ideas from its lists of the top beach destinations, family holidays, and golf vacations. You don't have to limit yourself to a single country; choose, for instance, Caribbean or Middle East from the home page for lists of the best-rated attractions and hotels in that area. If you're toying with the idea of going to Asia or the South Pacific but aren't sure where you want to go or what you'd like to do there, this is a great way to hone your search.

The site excels at delivering personalized travel info. The TripWatch service sends email alerts about the specific cities, hotels, and attractions of interest to you. After you submit your ZIP code, the Weekend Getaway Guide newsletter will provide personalized suggestions for weekend getaways within an easy drive of your hometown.

TripAdvisor isn't shy about sending you to other sites for great information, a pleasant departure from sites that would rather hold you hostage even when they don't have the information you want. While you're exploring a city's information page, you might find links to online guides at Frommer's, Fodor's, and other travel sites. Similarly, the Maps tab will point you to relevant maps at infoplease.com, LonelyPlanet.com, and other sites.

When you have a question or want to share your experiences in a favorite city, head to the TripAdvisor forums. These busy message boards let you chat it up with other seasoned travelers.

A prominently displayed Hotel Search feature purports to help you find a hotel by entering a city name, check-in date, and price level. This hotel search is significantly less useful than those at booking agents like hotels.com and Expedia: fewer hotels are listed, and this feature kept reporting "unexpected errors." The few times it worked, we did find it helpful to see visitors' reviews alongside hotel prices.

Get ratings from fellow travelers who have been there, done that at TripAdvisor.

USA Today Travel

America's colorful newspaper delivers an equally colorful Web site for travelers, at www.usatoday.com/travel. As you'd expect from a newspaper, there's plenty of reading material related to travel. This is a perfect resource for people who want to leisurely explore their travel options. Feature articles deliver thoughtful insight into the pleasures of domestic and international destinations.

Click the City Guides link for the lowdown on 40-plus cities around the world. The guides are comprehensive, with sections such as Where To Eat, Where To Stay, Where To Shop, and Out On The Town. We expected these guides to be, perhaps, stale compared to dedicated travel guide sites, but found them all updated within the past three months. But with about 40 cities, far fewer locales are covered than at some of the other travel sites.

The unique 10 Great section offers themed travel ideas, such as "10 Great Places To Have A Dam Good Time" and "10 Great Places

USA Today's travel tools include a flight tracker, airport delay monitor, and airline news.

To Pop the Question." These don't seem to be updated once they're posted (a few seemed out of date), but there are dozens more with timeless interest for all sorts of travelers. Also be sure to cruise to the Special Features section, which aims to broaden your horizons with travel guides.

After all that reading and research, when you're ready to book a flight, visit the Specials & Deals section. We found a bevy of posh but affordable hotel rooms in these advertised specials. If you're up for an adventure with just a little notice, click the Last Minute link: We found tempting hotel packages and all-inclusive resort getaways. (It's a wonder the rest of this article wasn't written on a cocktail napkin at a tropical beach.)

A worldwide hotel directory is located at the Find A Hotel link. The checkboxes allow you to locate a hotel with the amenities that you need, such as babysitting, rooms for disabled guests, and a pool. Few other hotel search tools provide such a fine level of control.

A number of regular features provide insight for voyagers. In the "Ask The Captain" column, a pilot answers readers' questions about air travel. "Traveler's Aide" answers other travel questions, such as dealing with delayed luggage and fighting fees for itinerary changes. You'll also find airline news and travel trends. Click the News Briefs link in the left sidebar to get the latest.

Before you make tracks for the airport, use the Flight Tracker tool to make sure your flight departure is on schedule. The color-coded Delays Map shows which major airports are experiencing slowdowns. If your airport is shown in orange or red to indicate delays, click on it to find out why. And if you'll be taking a laptop with you, click the Hotspot finder link for information about wireless Internet connections in 1,000 airports, 300 train stations, and 60,000 other locations.

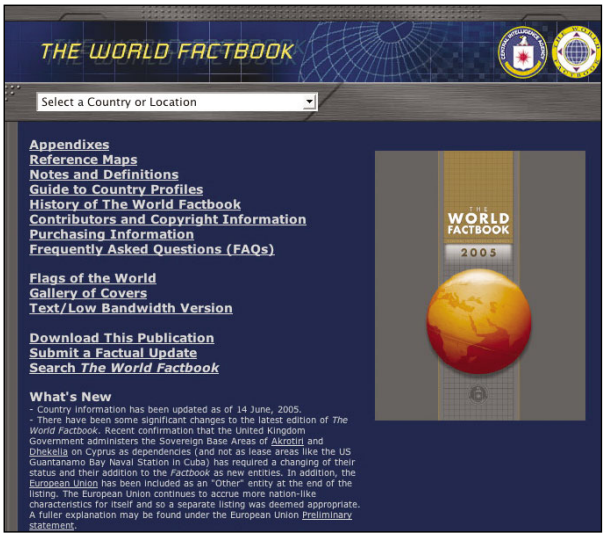
CIA World Factbook

The CIA World Factbook (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook) isn't your typical destination guide, replete with Top 50 Restaurants articles and ads for lush vacation spots. It is, as the name implies, a reference book from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Updated continually, it provides endless dreary statistics about every country on the planet—but also information that can be quite useful for any international traveler.

Start with the drop-down menu, which reveals a list of more than 260 countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Choosing one will reveal vital statistics about that country, including history, geography, population statistics, government, economy, and transportation system. Although the stats of gross domestic product, percentage of arable land, and major exports probably won't interest most would-be travelers, some of the information here, particularly the country's background and economic overview, can provide important information for informed travelers.

It's important to note that the Factbook provides big-picture information about countries, territories, and dependencies, but no specifics about states or provinces within them.

In the Flags Of The World section, you'll find images and descriptions of flags from every country. And the Reference Maps section has maps of counties and continents. The Web-based maps can be difficult to read, but the downloadable PDF versions provide greater detail that you can zoom in on.



The CIA World Factbook delivers useful insight for travelers, as well as endless statistics only a bureaucrat could love.

WorldWeb.com

You've researched; you've read; and you're ready to book that trip. You can do it at WorldWeb. This site combines a tourism guide and reservation system into one handy package. It doesn't have the most polished interface, but it's easy to use and chock full of great information.

To book your lodging, type the name of the city; you'll quickly see a list of hotels with rooms available. (You're not limited to just hotels; you can also search B&Bs, hostels, campgrounds, resorts, and other types of accommodations.) Notable amenities and

rate ranges are shown there. When you click the Book link, you'll see a list of room types and rates. Find something you like and make your reservation online. Similarly, you can make car rental reservations, choosing from a large number of rental agencies.

If you'll be traveling out of the country, head to the Travel Essentials section. These need-to-know facts include details about tipping, weather, time zones, and electricity. Also, the site's interactive maps let you scroll around to explore selected regions as you read descriptions of attractions and activities. The Restaurants & Bars guide contains a list of local eating establishments organized by type of cuisine, and the Events guide lists an eclectic mix of festivals, holidays, and exhibits.

The site is primarily focused on the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Italy, France, Canada, and Australia. If you'll be traveling elsewhere, you'll have to look elsewhere.

As you browse the site, you'll find pages that you'll want to refer to again. Use the special Personal TravelGuide links to save those pages for the future. Later, you'll find them just a click away from the home page in the Personal TravelGuide window.

You can book your hotel, tours, and transportation at WorldWeb.

Lonely Planet has been publishing travel guides for 30 years—and their Web site for not quite that long.

Lonely Planet

By now, you might think you've seen everything there is so see at online travel guides. But Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) will surprise you. First of all, we love the bittersweet name. These folks publish more than 600 travel guidebooks in 14 languages, and the site reflects the breadth and depth of their travel knowledge.

Start by choosing a destination in the Worldguide. The site delivers a colorful and informative description of that place. The facts include descriptions of major events, tips on when to go, culture, and attractions—both on and off the beaten track. The Money And Costs page tells what you can expect to pay for meals and lodging at budget levels from bare-bones to deluxe.

Even with a staff of hundreds, no site can know it all. So LP's unique "postcards" feature allows travelers to add their own insights—positive and negative—about the places they've visited.

When you're ready to book your trip, the Travel Services link will point you to LonelyPlanet's booking partners. It's more thorough than many other sites; in addition to the usual flights, hotels, and car rentals, you can book rail travel, hostels, and buy travel insurance.

The Travel Ticker (lonelyplanet.com/travel_ticker) is an advisory service that will alert you to events that effect travelers around the world. The news here ranges from urgent travel warnings to information about foreign holidays and elections that could disrupt your trip.

When you're in the mood to read about others' travel adventures, journey to the On The Road section, where you'll find feature articles, interviews, blog entries, and expert Q&A. You can easily focus on reading material about a particular region, a nice touch. If a trip inspires you to write, you can create your own Personal Trip Website, a blog for travelers.

The message board, called The Thorn Tree (thorntree.lonelyplanet.com), is a busy place. More than 5,000 new messages are posted daily. Many discussions are neatly arranged by geography, from Africa to South America. Other chats are devoted to topics such as traveling with kids, speaking the local lingo, and playing in the water.

In the Lonely Planet Shop, you can stock up on those guidebooks, which range from traditional ("Best Of Tokyo," "Africa On A Shoestring") to off-the-beaten track (such as "Experimental Travel"). ■

by Kevin Savetz